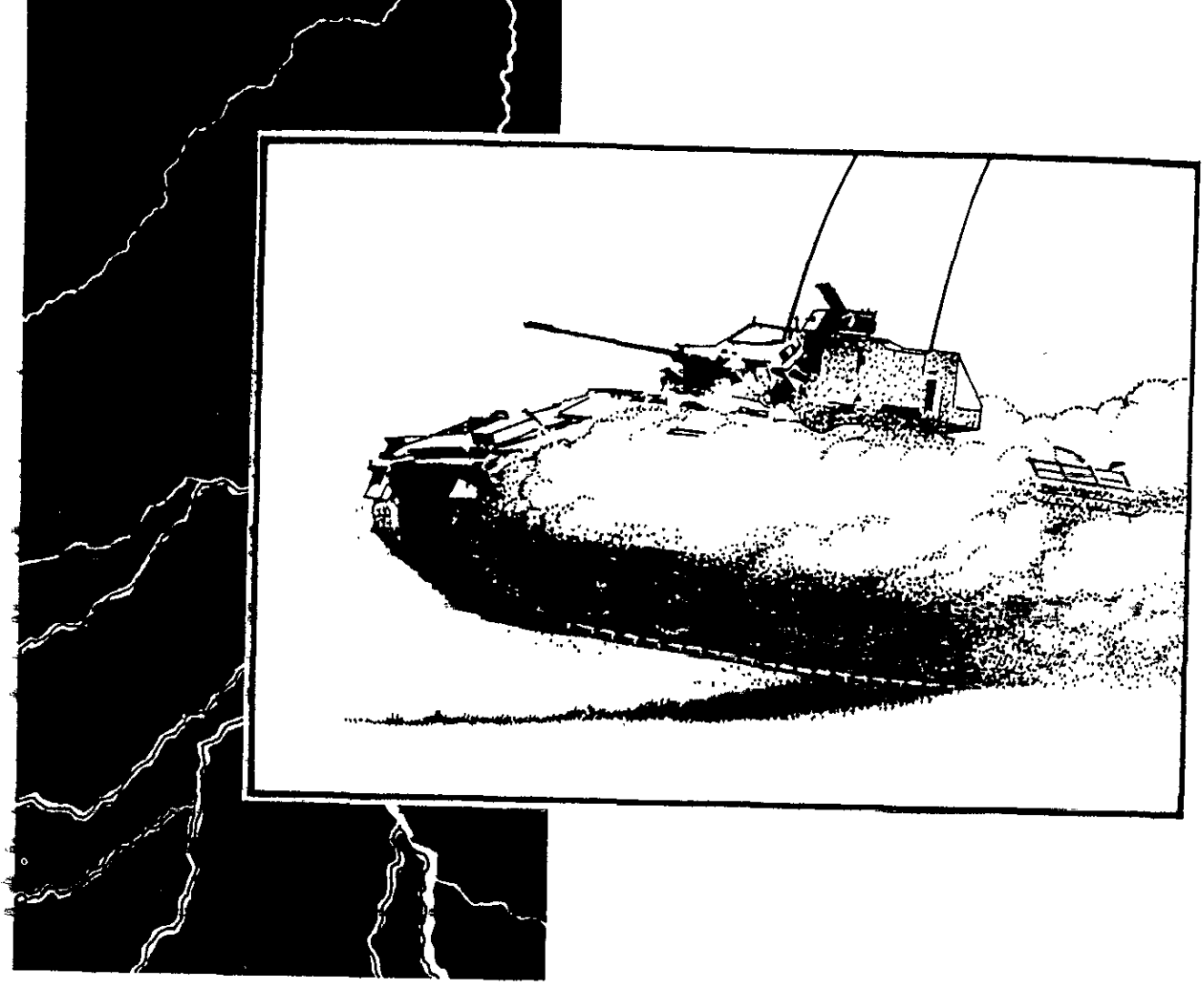


BLITZKRIEG: THE MYTH OF BLITZ

CAPTAIN THOMAS T. SMITH

Anyone who stands on "The Whale" at the National Training Center, or "Antelope Mound" at Fort Hood, or "Old Baldy" at Hohenfels in Germany will probably soon see an M1 tank or M2 Bradley platoon roaring by in a 40-mile-per-hour charge and a boil of dust.

This is what we in the combat arms like to think of as displaying an aggressive spirit, always in the best tradition of Rommel or Patton. The fact that this offensive spirit translates into great speed in miles per hour is an unfortunate misconception of past events.

Our concepts of the rapid pace of armor operations are firmly rooted in certain assumptions we make about the historical legacy of previous events. Jackson in the Valley, Stuart's ride, Sherman's march, Guderian's blitzkrieg, and other legendary episodes shape our maneuver thinking and sometimes drive us ever forward, ever faster.

But in those past operations, how fast was fast? Blitzkrieg (or "lightning war") is a term that conjures up the very image of speed. But what did blitzkrieg really amount to in miles per hour or per day? An examination and comparison of the estimated pace or rate of advance of a selected series of battles, campaigns, or specific operations may be surprising and may challenge our concept of the speed of past military operations.

The examples I have chosen are well known to military professionals, and were certainly not the run-of-the-mill kind. I selected them because they are outstanding examples of the use of maneuver and movement to gain an objective.

Except when noted, the average mile per hour figure was obtained by dividing the average daily advance by 12 hours, a compromise figure based on the infrequency of night operations for mechanized or armored forces as well as the need for maintenance, resupply, and sleep. No variables or coefficients were used to account for weather, terrain, enemy strength, or other factors. All of the operations were executed, however, under the general conditions of a movement to contact.

Since dismounted infantry should represent the slowest rate of advance, the first two examples are of marching infantry from the U.S. Civil War. These provide a standard base for the others.

• After a number of diversionary moves and zigzag feints, Confederate Lieutenant General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson with 17,000 of his quick-marching "foot cavalry" invaded the Shenandoah Valley in the summer of 1862. His command fought five battles from McDowell on 8 May to Port Republic on 9 June, and marched 260 miles. Jackson's movement averaged 8.6 miles (13.7 kilometers) per day, or 0.7 miles per hour.

• Major General William T. Sherman, in the 25 days between 15 November and 10 December 1864, led 62,000 Union soldiers in his march of 250 miles from Atlanta to the sea at Savannah. Sherman averaged 10 miles (16 kilometers) per day, 0.8 miles per hour.

The Civil War and frontier cavalry provide four more examples of rates of movement.

• During the Peninsular Campaign, Confederate General J. E. B. Stuart made his reconnaissance ride around Major General George B. McClellan's Army of the Potomac. Stuart and his 1,200 horse soldiers left Richmond on 12 June 1862 and covered 95 miles in three days. They averaged 31.6 miles (50.5 kilometers) per day, 2.6 miles per hour.

• Between 17 April and 2 May 1863, Colonel Benjamin H. Grierson led 1,700 Union cavalry on a raid from Grand Junction, Tennessee, to Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The brigade rode 600 miles in 16 days, averaging 37.5 miles (60 kilometers) per day at 3.1 miles per hour.

• In 1873, Colonel Ronald S. Mackenzie led 400 men of his 4th Cavalry on a raid from near Fort Clark, Texas, across the Rio Grande to Remolino, Mexico. From 17 to 19 May, Mackenzie's command remained in the saddle for the 140-mile round trip to attack a village of Kickapoo Indians who had been using Mexico as a sanctuary after their depredations. His average was 70 miles per day (112 kilometers) and (since they rode 24 hours a day) 2.9 miles per hour.

• Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer and the 7th Cavalry left Fort Abraham Lincoln, Dakota Territory, on 17 May 1876 and arrived at the Little Bighorn River on 29 June after riding 320 miles in 41 days. Their average speed was 7.8 miles (12.4 kilometers) per day, 0.6 miles per hour.

An examination of modern mechanized maneuver begins with German General Heinz Guderian, the principal architect of the operational aspects of blitzkrieg.

• In the original blitzkrieg—the first 14 days of the invasion of Poland, 1-14 September 1939—Guderian's XIX Corps of panzers and motorized infantry traveled 325 miles from their attack position to Brest-Litovsk, Poland, an average of 23.2 miles per day (37.1 kilometers), 1.9 miles per hour.

• During the invasion of France, 10-23 May 1940, Guderian's XIX Corps traveled 255 miles from the German border to Calais. Although their best day was 56 miles, their average daily rate was 19.6 miles (31.3 kilometers), 1.6 miles per hour.

• During the opening period of the invasion of the Soviet Union, 22 June to 16 July 1941, Guderian's Second Panzer Group, as part of Army Group Center, covered 413 miles from the Polish border to Smolensk. Guderian's best day was 72 miles. His command averaged 16.5 miles per day, 1.3 miles per hour. (Guderian's average for all three examples was 19.7 miles per day, 1.6 miles per hour.)

General Erwin Rommel's campaign in the desert of North Africa offers another four examples. I have also included as an example the British pursuit of Rommel's retreating forces:

• His first major offensive across Libya, launched on 24

AVERAGE RATE OF ADVANCE
SELECTED OPERATIONS

OPERATION	DATE	MILES	AVERAGE MILES PER DAY	AVERAGE MPH
Jackson's Valley Campaign	5 May-9 Jun 1862	260	8.6	0.7
Sherman's March	15 Nov-10 Dec 1864	250	10.0	0.8
CAVALRY				
Jeb Stuart's Ride	12-15 Jun 1862	95	31.6	2.6
Grierson's Raid	17 Apr-2 May 1863	600	37.5	3.1
Mackenzie's Raid	17-19 May 1873	140	70.0	2.9
Custer's Column	17 May-26 Jun 1876	320	7.8	0.6
ARMORED/MECHANIZED/MOTORIZED INFANTRY				
Guderian in Poland	1-14 Sep 1939	325	23.2	1.9
Guderian in France	10-23 May 1940	255	19.6	1.6
Guderian in Russia	22 Jun-16 Jul 1941	413	16.5	1.3
Rommel's 1st Offensive	24 Mar-10 Apr 1941	320	17.7	1.4
Rommel's 2d Offensive	21 Jan-4 Feb 1942	350	23.3	1.9
Rommel's Gazala Counteroffensive	26 May-2 Jun 1942	80	13.3	1.1
Rommel's Retreat from Alam Halfa	31 Aug-2 Sep 1942	80	40.0	3.3
Montgomery's Pursuit of Rommel	Nov 1942-Feb 1943	1400	16.5	1.3
Patton to Palermo	18-22 Jul 1943	100	20.0	1.6
VIII Corps at St. Lo	25-31 Jul 1944	40	5.7	0.4
Patton's Breakout	1-13 Aug 1944	160	12.3	1.0
Adan's Suez City Attack	18-23 Oct 1973	43	7.5	0.6

March 1941 at El Agheila, drove 320 miles to Tobruk, arriving on 10 April. In 18 days the German 5th Light and 15th Panzer Divisions averaged 17.7 miles (28 3 kilometers) per day, 1.4 miles per hour. (The 5th Light Division later became *the 21st Panzer Division.*)

• When he was eventually driven back to the border, Rommel launched a second offensive over the same ground in 1942. From El Agheila to the Gazala line, the Africa Corps covered 350 miles between 21 January and 4 February 1942. This was an average of 23.3 miles (37.2 kilometers) per day, 1.9 miles per hour.

• Between 26 March and 2 June 1942, Rommel conducted his end run around the Gazala-Bir Hacheim Line. From their laager to the beginning of the Cauldron battles, the 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions traveled about 60 miles in 8 days for a daily average of 7.5 miles (12 kilometers), or 0.6 miles per hour.

• In the Battle of Alam Halfa Ridge, Rommel's 15th Panzer traveled 30 miles on 31 August and 1 September 1942. Their average was 10 miles (16 kilometers) per day, 0.8 miles per hour.

Within the limits of this sample, Rommel's offensive operations in Africa averaged 14.6 miles per day, or 1.1 miles per hour.

• After Rommel's defeat at El Alamein, his retreating forces were pursued 1,400 miles to Tunisia by Lieutenant General Bernard L. Montgomery's British Eighth Army. This pursuit, slowed by skillful German delaying actions, lasted from November 1942 to February 1943, about 90 days. Montgomery's command averaged 15.5 miles (24.8 kilometers) per day, 1.3 miles per hour.

On the U.S. side, I put forth the following examples:

• In July 1943, as part of Lieutenant General George S. Patton's U.S. Seventh Army during the invasion of Sicily, the 2d U.S. Armored Division attacked from Gela to Palermo in 5 days. At the same time, the 3d U.S. Infantry Division attacked from Agrigento to Palermo. These divisions averaged 20 miles (32 kilometers) per day, 1.6 miles per hour.

• In France during the St. Lo breakthrough operations, the 4th and 6th U.S. Armored Divisions were elements of Major General Troy Middleton's VIII U.S. Corps. During the period 25-31 July 1944, the VIII Corps advanced 40 miles for an average of 5.7 miles (9.1 kilometers) per day, 0.4 miles per hour.

• These two divisions became part of Patton's forces when his U.S. Third Army became operational on 1 August 1944. During the breakout phase, the 6th Armored drove from Avranches to Brest, 180 miles in 7 days. The 4th Armored Division advanced from Avranches to Nantes, 160 miles 1-13 August, a daily average of 12.3 miles (19.6 kilometers), 1 mile per hour.

A final example of a relatively rapid armor rate of advance comes from the October 1973 Mideast War.

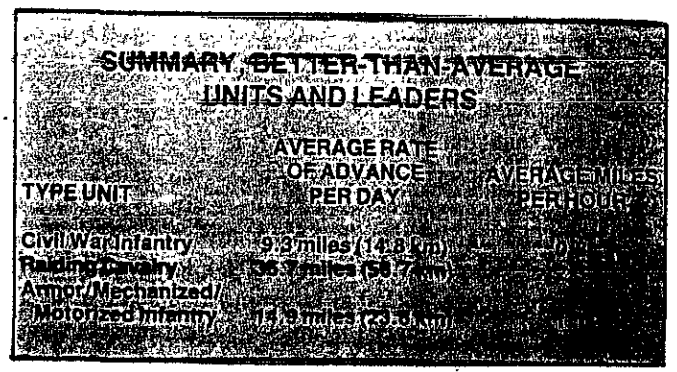
• After a continuous 30-hour armor battle, Israeli Major General Avraham Adan's armored division crossed the Suez Canal on a pontoon bridge near Deversoir the night of 17-18 October 1973. With other forces, Adan's division attacked south against Egyptian mechanized infantry and tank forces and reached Suez City on 23 October, trapping the Egyptian Third Army. This attack averaged 7.5 miles (12 kilometers) per day, 0.6 miles per hour.

From this limited survey, the following rates of advance have been calculated for better-than-average units and leaders:

• The Civil War infantry in this survey averaged 9.3 miles (14.8 kilometers) per day, 0.8 miles per hour.

• The raiding cavalry had the highest averages of the survey—36.7 miles (58.7 kilometers) per day, 2.3 miles per hour.

• The average for the armor/mechanized/motorized infantry advances is 14.9 miles (23.8 kilometers), 1.1 miles per hour.



The rate of advance for an armored force is always limited, of course, by its appetite for fuel and ammunition and by the speed at which these commodities can be transported. The German armored blitzkrieg in Russia, for example, had one-half million horses in its supply column. In the absence of a road network or deep mud, the animals often proved more efficient than wheels.

None of these examples of armored force advances produced an average speed of more than 2 miles per hour. Long advances are a product of steady momentum and perserverance rather than dash. This is not to suggest that the mobility and speed of armored vehicles are not important to operations. Armored battles have brief opportunities that can be seized only by a burst of speed or a bold assault.

Certainly, the dash speed between firing positions gives a vehicle an important element of protection, and also allows it to seek cover rapidly or to even evade enemy fire. Vehicle speed also allows commanders to shift forces rapidly during a battle. As the evidence in this study suggests, however, our historical models such as Guderian, Rommel, and Patton did not use the potential speed of their forces to sacrifice security or to rush blindly into uncertain situations.

We might well take note of this lesson when we train our own tank and Bradley platoons.

Captain Thomas T. Smith, commissioned from the Officer Candidate School in 1982, has served as a Bradley platoon leader and company commander in the 1st Battalion, 41st Infantry. He is now attending graduate school at Texas A and M University in preparation for instructor duty at the United States Military Academy.
